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Fact and Illusion in Painting

Patricia Sennett

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FACT AND ILLUSION IN PAINTING

Patricia M. Sennett

Candidate for the Master of Fine Arts Degree
in the College of Fine and Applied Arts
of the Rochester Institute of Technology

March 11, 1970

Professor Frederick Meyer, Advisor

DEDICATION

For
Arthur,
Michael, Susan and Peter

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PROPOSAL

THESIS PROPOSAL

I. The purpose of this Thesis is to reveal in a series of paintings the importance of fact in painting (i.e., tangible objects and materials as opposed to the illusionism of classical painting) and attempt to demonstrate how the combinations or juxtapositions of such factual elements heighten the illusory quality in a painting.

II. The scope of this Thesis will include:

Readings related to its historical and experiential perspectives, critical and philosophical essays on the subject, and references to its anthropological and/or its sociological import.

The factual elements and acrylic and oil paints to be used on canvas, wood or other suitable material.

Eight to twelve paintings.

III. Procedures: With each painting, an attempt will be made to comprehend the actual existence of the fact(s), compose them, and hopefully cancel the appearance of the physical media, the consequence of which should be the creation of illusory effects which are diametrically opposed to their factual origins.

IV. Alternative Proposals

A. Tactile Values In Painting

1. The relationship of real and ideated tactile values and their historical foundations to that of personal work.

B. Polymorphic And Biomorphie Symbols In Painting

1. Reflection into the philosophical basis for personal use of symbols and the conventional versus the organic employment of materials, forms and colors.

INTRODUCTION

EXPOSITION

EXPOSITION

I used factual objects in my paintings not only because I enjoyed the material phenomena, but wished to extend the boundaries of my knowledge, perception, and constructive abilities. Each object presented technical problems regarding its makeup, its application to the painting, and its relationship to other considerations in the composition.

Robert Rauschenberg has a premise regarding the dialogue between actual objects and the picture plane as a point of departure for a whole new field of inquiry which, I think, is applicable here. He argues that formal relationships alone are an insufficient reflection of reality. At the same time, Rauschenberg refines his intuition that raw artifacts need some further projection into the pictorial life of the work of art.¹⁴

I have tried to remain initially aware of the above words that I chose to underscore and the way in which they apply to my work.

The textures were built up with either modeling paste, aluminum or bronze paint as a base. Frequently, fabric, sand or other materials were added to arrive at different surface treatments.

¹⁴Max Kozloff, Critical Essays On A Century Of Modern Art, (New York; Simon and Schuster, Publishers, 1969), p. 213.

The acquisition of the objects was no problem; the collaboration of family and friends (in addition to my chronic scavenging) provided a wealth of materials.

The first attempts to add texture and/or objects to the paintings were timid ventures, uncertainly handled and invariably produced self-conscious results. I wanted to permit myself a free, unprejudiced approach to all possibilities because each object or desired textural effect required a new orientation. Since I had no way of knowing their limitations until I worked with them, I did not think I was intimidated by the mixed media. However, my hesitation to accept or, perhaps, explore some of the larger challenges that I recognized in some of the objects unsettles me as I feel it impeded the growth of my artistic vocabulary, attitudes, and aims. I am confident, I might add, that this barrier should become negligible as I gain more experience.

The experiences were largely fruitful; some, very frustrating. If nothing else, a relationship to the material was established.

The basic work strategies employed were much the same. All the ideas regarding the compositions appeared to gravitate around the possibilities afforded by the phenomenal reality of the foreign elements to be embodied in the paintings. Where there was no tangible object added to the picture plane, the color masses were developed around areas which alluded to

a relief by my having initially sprayed or washed the canvas with grid, circle or other forms. Almost all of the paintings reflect one mood and mode of operation and entertain similar images--circles, arcs and variations thereof--usually within a square.

Due to extreme dryness in the studio, a considerable amount of the stretcher bars which I had cut and stored had warped. Consequently, I chose to paint on pressed board--guaranteed not to warp. Although it provided new opportunities for expression, its greatest limitation was its weight. As a result, the size of the paintings on the fabricated wood does not exceed two-by-two feet.

On the following pages, I have chronicled photographs of work done not only during the fall and winter quarters, but some of which were painted during the preceding summer session since I feel that these visual references are clearly connected with the work in my thesis. Hopefully, they are also a graphic demonstration of acquired knowledge, skills and competence in my work.

I have chosen not to elaborate on each painting as I feel they speak for themselves and additional comments are simply statements after the fact.

CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

I trust that my work reflects a concerted effort to take objects of experience and to combine, juxtapose or alter the actual existence of their fact, the consequence of which was intended to heighten the spiritual or illusory quality of the paintings.

I am not convinced that I was completely successful. In evaluating the finished paintings, it appears to me that some works indicate that a seductive surface color and/or a texture became the unconscious priorities during the making of the painting. I also wish I could be more comfortable about the two-by-two foot series on wood. Although I feel that they are not only competent and fulfill my stated intentions, I respond to them now as one might to the satisfactory solution of a set of design problems.

Hindsight now suggests that I may have been guilty of unwittingly allowing some of the factual materials to assert themselves to the point where I was lured away from my original intentions and thereby compromised pictorial unity. Nonetheless, I am confident that I have made considerable strides in my work and am satisfied to submit my paintings as a testimony to that statement.

Etienne Gilson explains my further reflections on my work much better than I am prepared to:

"The artist is never the spectator of his work while he is working on it, the views that he takes of his work in progress being so many integrating elements of the act of producing them, and the spectator of the work is never its author since the experience that he acquires of it presupposes that the work is fully done. Artistic creation is a freedom structured of freedoms which do not lend themselves to enumeration, for though they are multiple they form but one whose history cannot be told by anybody--not even the artist--because we know the outcome only after the event, whereas it is of the essence of the creative act that when it is happening, the person who lives it is himself ignorant of its end."¹⁵

This has been a productive term. My work, however, is not finished; I have been nourished by these experiences and fully intend to expand new ideas and translate them into paintings of consequence.

¹⁵ Etienne Gilson, Forms And Structures, (New York; Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), pp. 25-6.

FACT AND ILLUSION IN PAINTING

Book II .

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PHOTOGRAPHS

























